

## Second Coming or Looming Apocalypse: The Writer in Modern TV

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BFI, Monday 14 June 2010

### Introduction

Many people point to a Golden Age of television drama when authored works from writers like Plater, Bleasdale and Potter prevailed and the single play was king. Some now argue the early 1990s into the 2000s were a coming of age for a second generation of greats including Jimmy McGovern, Tony Marchant, Peter Moffat, Paul Abbott, Abi Morgan, Russell T Davis and others.

But the coming of age of this second generation collided with the prevalence of well-funded US TV which left audiences spellbound.

Britain has the writing talent – there's no question of that. The question is, are the conditions of the current industry climate conducive to supporting it? What is the future for Britain's TV writers? Where are they headed? And what obstacles do they face along the way?

The panel facing these questions includes writers, Donna Franceschild, Jimmy McGovern, and Tony Marchant; Radio Times TV editor David Butcher, producers Gub Neal and Nicola Shindler and BBC commissioner Ben Stephenson.

### Q: Second coming or looming apocalypse?

BS: Not necessarily a "second" coming, but certainly a coming (for want of a better phrase). Good writing never goes away, it just changes with the times. To talk about a golden age is retrospective. From where I sit, I feel there are really fantastic scripts coming through. Yes there are issues around production, but I wouldn't do this job unless I was excited and passionate about the work.

NS: I think the answer is somewhere in the middle. It can be hard to make drama about certain subjects and there are fashions and trends, but it's no good looking back, it's always about the next project and how that does.

DF: When TV is at its best, it's an art form. There's always an evolution. The previous generation of writers inspires the next generation and this is how you move forward. That still happens, the question now is how amenable that evolution aspect is in the current climate.

TM: I'm not disillusioned about how hard it is in the current climate but that doesn't mean I'm going to pack it all in. I was at a Labour leadership hustings the other day and there was a sense that the Labour party are now embracing dissent in a way they haven't been able to for the last 13 years. In many ways I think the BBC are learning the same lessons now and learning to embrace dissent.

### Q: Do people invoke this notion of a "golden age"

BS: You're not going to get a good idea from invoking a golden age, but we can learn from TV history and take lessons from that. The truth is, what makes a hit is risk. People's careers are made by TV that no-one thinks they want. Risk can define great TV drama. And tomorrow matters more than yesterday.

**Q: What about the shape of a drama, single play versus series etc. How significant is the shape?**

GN: The single slot is a challenge now. Ten or fifteen years ago, single play opportunities were immense. Now they're reduced to one or two a year which means there's less opportunity to say something immensely authored. Singles are costly. When I was commissioning for Channel 4 we were spending something like £135m on original drama and making 10 or 12 a year.

**Political drama: clips were played from The Deal, State of Play and Mark of Cain.**

**Q: Do you think people say, "there's no point sending this script to the BBC because it's too political and they won't make it", is there that kind of self-censorship going on?**

NS: I don't think I would not send something because of politics. We know if a broadcaster is looking for certain types of things so when someone comes in with an idea I would look for the best commissioner for the piece. And I would go on my own taste as well.

**Q: Are there any subjects the BBC wouldn't do?**

BS: No. BBC4 is full of political and biographical drama about living people. And no indie would say we're not going to send this script to the BBC if it was the right place for it because they're a business and they have to run like a business and do what's best to get projects off the ground. There are few dramas about that are political with a big P. Mark of Cain was, yes. But State of Play is more about the relationship between two men, and so is The Deal. Five Daughters was intensely political and actually changed news coverage of the Bradford murders. There aren't a huge number of pieces that actually change politics. No internal BBC politics have ever stopped a drama being made that we wanted to make.

TM: Genre plays a big part in this too. Drama is sometimes bent out of shape to make it a thriller or whatever, when sometimes the subject might have been more interesting without being turned into a whodunit. Five Days was essentially a drama about race and faith dressed up as a thriller – and all channels are guilty of doing it not just the BBC. It's like difficult subjects can be tackled if they're turned into a crime drama or a genre piece.

BS: The Trojan horse of genre can help bring a difficult subject to a larger audience but it wouldn't be right to crowbar genre in. I don't think things are being bent out of shape to make it genre, it's just something some things develop into. Sometimes a bit of genre can go a long way to shape an idea but a "bit of thriller" tacked on to something else is just going to be pants.

DB: High concept is easy to sell and to cut through to an audience but the audience relate to the characters not the genre. With Life on Mars, the hook was genre, but the audience fell in love with Gene Hunt.

NS: When people come in with an idea the question often is, is the idea big enough? I think the fashion or need for high concept is passing.

DB: Journalists haven't helped because genre gives us a handle.

GN: Low concept, high character is hard to sell. And the UK aren't setting the precedent for this, it's true everywhere. People ask, what's it like? If the answer is, well it's like nothing you've ever seen before, people get nervous.

BS: But the worst thing you can do is say it's like x crossed with y. It's better to do something that's like nothing anyone's ever seen before.

NS: It's also about casting, that's a hook now. We had the script for *Single Father* for five years. Then we cast David Tennant and now it's being made.

BS: Yes but it also changed format, it was a series and now it's a single. That doesn't have a high concept, it's just character. It's just about people's lives so giving it the intensity of a single drama works best. When you have a huge character at the heart of something you need an actor who can give it that scale, and that emotional scale as well. David Tennant is an exceptional actor, it's not like famous actors who can't act will get things made. And ultimately, if the script is crap, having a famous actor attached won't make any difference.

**Q: Do the writers on the panel feel the pressures of genre or casting?**

DF: I think what's interesting is that the quietest people on the panel so far have been the writers. It used to be that people were interested in what writers had to say but that seems to have shifted now so we're more interested in what commissioners and producers have to say. Writers feel that shift and they are self-censoring with regards to what they think the market wants or the commissioners want. The exception to that is Jimmy's *The Street*. That should have shown how writer led programmes that are low concept and high character can be a critical success and be a hit with audiences. But it hasn't had that effect. It's seen as an exception. Broadcasters and executives talk to each other, not to writers. Writers don't ask what am I passionate about? They ask, what can I sell? They do at least need to be asking, how can I sell what I'm passionate about.

BS: I can't bear self-censorship and I've talked about this a lot – what I want is good work. And that only comes from an engaged, passionate writers. What's best for me is to find the best drama out there. And yes, it's a business and there are certain pressures and sometimes that's not ideal, but my hope is that that's where the BBC comes from: finding the best writers, with something to say. I want people to offer scripts they really care about.

**Racial drama: clips from *England Expects*, *Second Generation* and *Shoot the Messenger*.**

Q: Drama dealing with race or racism was something missing from the "golden age" wasn't it?

DB: That's true, and in terms of on-screen representation things have improved but it's hard to find strong black writers *working* in TV. Why is that?

**Q: But there are strong black writers working in the theatre, so why might that be?**

TM: Producers need to encourage and promote new voices and young people aren't encouraged into TV, it's all about the business now and the margins and the sales.

JM: It's a class issue as well. There aren't many working class writers in theatre and not many in positions of power in TV.

BS: Anne Mensah, though she hates being talked about like this, is not white. But Jimmy is right that it's also about class. And it goes right back to school and what we say to kids at school. We need to say you can achieve whatever you want. And writing for TV is often not viewed as a valid way of making a living when it is.

**Q: Do you think white writers are more reluctant to create black characters because they have liberal guilt about trying to represent other cultures and so on?**

TM: If you write in a colour blind way and cast black actors for roles that could be either black or white and it doesn't make any difference then you can be criticised for ignoring ethnicity so it is difficult. But writers coming up through television now are being asked to go through the sausage machine of continuing drama and writing for Casualty and Holby City means they lose their voices. Young ethnic voices aren't going to be heard in that environment. I would argue for a return to TV plays but "play" in relation to telly has almost become a dirty word.

BS: EastEnders isn't the way for everyone, but EastEnders has one of the highest non-white audiences and the Writers Academy has the highest non-white attendance, so it can be a good place. But it's not going to be right for everyone and we do need to find alternatives. I don't know what the answer is. And I know what we're talking about, single plays and so on, doesn't cost much, but it might be the difference between that and three serials on BBC2 so we need to find a balance and make those decisions because there has to be a way of nurturing those writers who can do more than an hour but aren't quite ready to carry a whole six part series on their own.

**Historical drama: clips from The Devil's Whore, The Key, Five Minutes of Heaven**

**Q: Historical drama is easy to sell but expensive to make, is that the paradox?**

NS: The license from broadcasters no longer covers the costs of production so producers have to find other ways, filming abroad, selling in advance, any ways they can think of to try and raise the money.

GN: Budgets are a real challenge. The TV industry is becoming increasingly like film where you need multiple partners and co-producers to finance it but that increases editorial input so protecting the original vision of the drama whilst raising the money is a new challenge that we didn't have in the old days.

**Q: And is that partly because standards are higher and people expect better production values?**

BS: The bottom has fallen out of historical drama to some extent. There's a worldwide global recession and people want home grown stories about their own lives so we're the only country still making historical drama really. And if you're going to make low budget drama you have to really make it stand out, BAFTA winning quality.

DB: Factual documentary does it a lot and makes cheap battle scenes but when you're watching it you wish it was The Devil's Whore and done properly and really getting at the heart of the drama being covered. But that's much more expensive.

**Q: There were a lot of dramas about dead celebrities at the BAFTAS, too many?**

BS: When something is a success it becomes the fashion and it's hard to break out of it. It means having a success over here and then turning and running in the other direction. It's difficult. But it's important.

**Faith and morality drama: clips from Liam, God on Trial, and Second Coming.**

**Q: In production terms is religion a sensitive subject? Is it still taboo for some people?**

NS: When we made *Second Coming*, we took it to Channel 4 when Gub was there and he greenlit it. Then, when Gub left, it was immediately ungreenlit. Russell was adamant that it had to be told in a certain way so we took it to ITV and they just got it. They made it immediately. But the person you take it to has to just get it. And *Second Coming* offended a huge number of people.

BS: It is a sensitive issue. I'm not often given scripts that are actually *about* religion. Religion is a theme that effects people's writing though.

TM: What's dramatically interesting isn't always the religion aspect. The most compelling moral question can be "how to be good" and that can involve religion but not always.

NS: And every good script has a writer's ideology behind it, their belief and their values. That's not necessarily religious belief. But without that conviction, any script will be bland.

**Q&A opened up to the audience:**

**Q: Will scheduled TV be lost now that we have iPlayer and on demand TV?**

BS: Live viewing of scheduled TV or time recorded viewing is still the norm. Only about 200,000 watch on iPlayer so it's a minority. I find it encouraging that people are still engaged by scheduled drama and the appetite is still there, especially for drama at 9pm. BBC3 has a younger audience and that's a more time shifted audience but old traditions die hard.

**Q: So drama won't vanish?**

DF: Drama will always be around. Even YouTube is just drama finding another way. Drama narratives are hardwired into us. If drama reflects people's lives back at them, it will continue in whatever media is available. Things just evolve.

**Q: Many black writers feel they're being told their work is niche and won't get bums on seats so they feel they have to water down the message or go to the theatre and find a small audience where they can speak from the heart without conforming to genre and so on.**

BS: Anyone who says you have to water down your voice should be sacked. We're looking for bold voices.

JM: I get lots of approaches from theatre writers who want to write for *The Street* or whatever and I'm telling you, a lot of theatre writers are crap. It's boring. You don't learn story structure writing in the theatre. Stay away from the theatre, it's the worst thing you can do if you want to write for TV. Fight to get on a soap, get on *Corrie*, get on *Emmerdale*. That's where you'll learn.

**Q: Is there a chance that increasing financial pressures could provide more opportunities for making low budget single plays, perhaps in a studio?**

TM: Guerrilla filmmakers can do it cheaply. You can do it cheaper. You can do period cheaper. But the other thing is directors in TV really want to be film directors so they don't want to do it on a low budget. They don't want to do an hour drama for £200,000 or less.

NS: Studio plays aren't the right thing, that's going backwards. Audiences wouldn't want it, they have higher expectations now. But using a low budget film model to make a 60m or 90m single for TV could work.

TM: No, not everything would work in a studio. Contained thrillers might. But we do need to find cheaper quicker filmmaking techniques so we can make more opportunities.